

Practicing Principals' Perceptions Regarding Online Courses for the Superintendent's Licensure Program

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The EDAD (Educational Department of Administration) at Ashland University has developed an online graduate course program for candidates, desiring to receive the Ohio superintendent's license. The online program is in the first year of implementation and the department's faculty is continuously looking to enrich and further develop the courses for maximum academic benefit for the students. A survey was administered in this initial year to garner students' perceptions, pertaining to the online courses. The purpose of this paper is to describe the results of the survey and the implications for the program and future research.

Keywords: online education, school principal, educational leadership

Introduction

There has been an ever-increasing demand for online courses at the university level. Wuensch, Aziz, Ozan, Kishore, and Tabrizi's (2009) study in this area reported that enrollment in online courses in colleges and universities across the US has recently grown much more rapidly (9.7%) than it has been the case overall (1.5%) with almost 3.5 million students taking at least one online course. Bryan, Honaker, and Duay (2005) further reported that with the expansion of the World Wide Web in recent years, higher education had experienced a dramatic change in the way that instruction was delivered to students living both near and far. Recognizing the convenience of learning at anytime and anywhere, busy students across the US are registering for online classes in increasing numbers. In order to remain competitive in this new environment, many institutions have significantly increased the number of courses offered online.

Ashland University's EDAD (Educational Department of Administration) recognizes this trend and demand for online programming, and thus, the faculty members have developed a series of online courses for students working on their superintendent's license. A significant amount of planning and programming have gone into the formulation of these courses, during this initial year of implementation; furthermore, there is a commitment and desire to further enhance the online courses.

This investment of time and energy is needed in order to produce the quality courses for the superintendent licensure candidates (whether online or face-to-face courses). Initial research indicated that superintendent's candidates desired the online opportunities, and wanted the presentation of educational materials and activities that were relevant, and specifically, aligned with online programming.

This growth of online offerings requires that the EDAD faculty ask the necessary questions related to these types of superintendent's licensure courses. We cannot build programs and course contents based solely on

what the faculty think is the most productive and beneficial, rather we need to survey individuals who may take these courses and/or those who are currently enrolled in the courses.

Conceptual Framework

As university courses and programs move to online opportunities, it becomes imperative that instructors and administrators review and develop the courses as to their relevancy and quality for online students. Very limited research has been done to garner feedbacks concerning online programs in the educational administration area.

The sparse review has mainly come from end-of-course evaluations which seem to assess the instructor more than the major components of the course. Wuensch et al. (2009) reported that most research regarding student perceptions of online education courses had centered on the characteristic of the technologies used in these courses, rather than the instructional methods and contents. Smart and Cappel (2006) further indicated that few studies had focused on learners' satisfaction with online instruction, particularly in the transition to online learning from traditional approaches.

With this sudden surge of online programming, the question of the contents and format of these online courses need to be researched and answered. Overall, the setup, methodology, activities and materials used in these online courses are not currently research-based; most online offerings are still evolving in their development. As a result, this superintendent's license program can benefit from this type of research and survey. It is necessary to organize the course's format, knowledge areas, content, skill areas and resources, in order to develop the most beneficial online courses for these superintendent's licensure candidates. There have been a number of studies to investigate students' learning with online courses; however, most of this research has been focused on students' and instructors' interactivity in these types of classes (Arbaugh, 2000; Swan, 2001).

Methodology

A review of the literature reveals that little research has been conducted with a focus on the perceptions of individuals who are candidates for the superintendent's licensure program. This study has been structured to initially observe these candidates' perceptions and opinions, regarding the online courses.

Participants in this survey study were practicing principals in 13 Ohio counties surrounding Ashland University. These 13 counties are the geographical area that, generally, the students come from when enrolling in graduate courses at the university. For the purpose of this study, the principals were chosen, as they are the most likely candidates to enter the superintendent's licensure program. Participants were principals from both public, private and charter schools, who would require online licensure to become a school superintendent; furthermore, this target population included elementary, middle school and high school administrators.

Two hundred and forty principals were electronically sent into the survey. A university email listing was used to send these online surveys. Almost 42% of the surveys were completed and returned for analysis. A cover letter explaining the purposes and procedures for completion of the survey was also sent.

The survey was designed to determine the perceptions of the potential superintendent's licensure candidates regarding the online courses. The two page, Web-based survey consisted of a first part that asked for information to determine the administrative position level (elementary, middle school and high school), the number of years as an administrator and their type of school (urban, rural or suburban). The second part of the

survey was set up with five questions that solicited perceptions and responses in terms of learning activities administrative content areas, reasons for taking courses, personal interest in the pursuance of a license, and the type of class format preferred. Survey takers' responses within each question consisted of selecting a given response item, for example, in question 4, the learning activities which the respondents saw as the most beneficial among the response items were case studies, simulations, research projects, analysis of journal articles and the development of power point presentations.

A final open-ended question was asked for additional information that the survey participant could choose to answer and expand upon in detail.

Prior to electronically sending the survey, the instrument was reviewed for readability, appearance, flow of thoughts and transmission issues by other faculty members.

During the Spring of 2009, the online survey was sent to collect data, pertaining to the candidate's perceptions of online courses for the superintendent's license. Participants responded by marking a force-choice "X" answer in the first eight questions, plus adding their open-ended comments. The researcher collected data from each question, whether force-choice or open-ended items.

Although, the completion of the survey was voluntary, the response rate was 41.6%, with 100 respondents out of a pool of 240 practicing principals. The data received from the completed online survey were compiled by Zoomerang.com at Ashland University's Instructional Technology Department. In the task of organizing and analyzing the data, frequency distribution tables were set up. A breakdown of responses to indicate different perceptions of the survey takers was done by Zoomerang.com. These Web-based results were exported from Zoomerang.com into a text file.

Results

The participants included 100 practicing principals whose building level position, years of administrative experience, and type of school (urban, rural or suburban) varied widely. This demographical data clearly indicated that the pool of participants came from a broad cross-section of principals.

These principals were fairly well-balanced when it came to building level positions—39% from elementary schools, 28% from middle schools, and 33% from high schools. Regarding the years of experience as an administrator, the years were evenly balanced among the survey takers—26% of the principals had 0-4 years, 38% of the principals had 5-10 years and 37% of the principals had 10 plus years of administrative experience. Finally, the type of school district each of these respondents served were varied, however, not as skewed as the first two demographic categories. Twenty three percent of the principals came from city schools, while 8% came from suburban schools, and 69% of the principals served in rural schools. Overall, this demographic data seems quite similar to the overall population of practicing principals in the state.

These principals took this online survey that asked questions concerning their perceptions of online courses in the superintendent's license program. The questions in the survey were to elicit opinions and thoughts regarding learning activities, topical areas, reasons and overall format of the online courses.

The survey takers' responses on each question were compiled and broken down by number and percentage of each choice. Participants revealed generally a mixture of perceptions on each question. To understand the distribution of responses to the survey questions, frequency tables were used to organize and summarize the data.

Frequency distribution results in Table 1 indicate that 80% of the practicing principals see "case studies"

as the most beneficial learning activity for these licensure online courses.

Table 1

Learning Activities Perceived as Most Beneficial Within Online Course

Learning activity	N	Percentage (%) [*]
Case studies	66	80
Simulations	47	57
Analysis of journal articles	44	54
Power point presentation	23	28
Research project	19	23
Other	10	11

Note. ^{*}represents item percentage based on each survey respondent selecting up to three choices.

Two other learning activities that the respondents perceived as beneficial were “simulations” of real life administrative issues (57%) and the “analysis of journal articles” (54%). Conversely, 28% of respondents thought power point presentations would benefit their online learning, while only 23% of the respondents believed research projects would be beneficial.

Frequency, Table 2 broke down the results of topical areas in school administration that the respondents perceived as important in the superintendent's licensure program. The survey takers could select up to six different topics from a fairly extensive listing of administrative areas. The topical area perceived as the most significant with the principals was “finance” of school. Eighty two percent of the respondents chose this area.

Table 2

Administrative Areas Perceived as Most Important in the Superintendent's Licensure Program

Administrative area	N	Percentage (%) [*]
Personnel administration	50	60
Curriculum	28	34
Leadership	52	63
Resource management	35	42
Conflict resolution	19	23
Finance	68	82
Law	65	78
Buildings and grounds	27	33
Public relations	51	61
Collective bargaining	54	65
Professional development	15	18
Technology	11	13
Other	0	0
Other, please specify	4	5

Note. ^{*}represents item percentage based on each survey respondent selecting up to six choices.

Close behind in the rankings for importance was school law with 78% of the respondents. Four other administrative topical areas were aggregated fairly closely together. They were in rank of importance: collective bargaining of 65%, leadership of 63%, public relations of 61%, and personnel administration of 60%. After these six areas, there was a drop off of significance to all other topical areas in the response list.

In Table 3, the reasons for taking online course by the respondents were aggregated. The results indicate

“convenience” (87%) as the leading reason for principals to enroll in an online course for the superintendent’s license. The next reason with 77% of the responses was to “work on your own schedule”, while 61% of the survey takers thought to “work at your own pace” was a primary reason in taking the courses.

Table 3

Reasons Given for Taking Online Course

Reasons	N	Percentage (%)*
Convenience	71	87
Work on your own schedule	63	77
Work at your own pace	50	61
Independent study format	26	32
Technology oriented	14	17
Other	4	17

Note. *represents item percentage based on each survey respondent selecting several choices.

Roby and Hampikian (2002) reported similar students’ perceptions of online courses in their research by indentifying convenience, self-paced learning and flexibility as benefits when taking online courses. All other choices in this question for reasons were insignificant in comparison to these top reasons.

Question 4 asked whether the practicing principals had an interest in pursuing the superintendent’s license. Fifty one percent of the respondents stated “Yes”, in comparison to 49% indicating that they were not interested (see Table 4). As a follow-up question, respondents who reported an interest in the licensure pursuit were asked whether they thought a particular course format was the best for them.

Table 4

Personal Interest in Pursuing a Superintendent’s License

Choice	N	Percentage (%)
Yes	40	51
No	38	49

Table 5 displays the breakdown of these varied course formats (face-to-face classes, online classes, or hybrid classes) and corresponding survey results.

Table 5

Varied Course Formats Perceived as Most Suitable for Respondents

Formats	N	Percentage (%)
Face-to-face	4	8
Online	11	22
Hybrid	32	70

Hybrid classes (the combination of face-to-face classes and online classes) were the overwhelming choice as the preferred class format. Twenty four percent of the respondents thought pure online courses were the best format and 9% saw face-to-face classes as being the best approach for them.

In the final portion of the survey, participants were asked to respond to an open-ended question, “What other suggestions (do you have) to further develop a quality superintendent’s preparation program”. From the participants’ pool of 100 individuals, 19 respondents commented on the open-ended question portion. Respondents generally focused on suggestions and recommendations for online courses. Many of these

responses were positive about the online course offerings. Some responses from the practicing principals' groups included "I think that online courses are great, but I think any superintendent needs to network with other superintendents", "I feel that an online set up would be best"; "With crazy schedules and the demands that we are all under. Online courses make getting my superintendent's license a great deal easier"; and "I appreciate your efforts". Candidates frequently commented on the open-ended question that the course work needs to contain real-life, practical content and activities, whether the course was online or face-to-face.

However, some respondents did voice a negative perception and criticism in this open-ended question. Students commented, "I feel that networking with others in the field adds value and insights that might not be gleaned from online work" and "Not online, the face-to-face is nice in case of questions".

Discussion and Conclusions

This survey project opens up the research investigation of online courses for the superintendent's license program by providing a collection process and the analysis of survey results.

The educational significance of this study is that it initiates the process of collection, analysis and development of online programs for superintendent's licensure candidates and, furthermore, provides insight into how these candidates perceive the format and content of online courses.

The makeup of courses for the superintendent's licensure program has been historically traditional, as universities have provided students with learning experiences in a face-to-face class. The online courses have the same goals of providing rich learning activities and experiences; however, the course format to instruct the students is vastly different. As university administrators and instructors, we need to research and study the entire makeup and contents of the online program for the superintendent license. The survey results will help the development and revision of these courses. The perceptions of these practicing principals towards the online courses will serve as a solid foundation, on which university instructors can build and enhance the online courses. This exploration of the principals' perceptions could also inform faculty regarding how to better meet the needs of their current and future students.

In researching this area, limited survey work has been completed on this type of licensure program. It is such a relatively new research area that almost everyone is just beginning to formulate an opinion on the value of these online courses. The most frequent viewpoints expressed regarding online programs were positive; however, the reasons for this perception and what should be embedded in the program's contents and learning components have not been widely investigated.

University instructors and administrators have recently started to study and discuss the merits of online courses. As mentioned earlier, the most frequent viewpoints, regarding online programs were generally positive; these viewpoints were being expressed through students' discussions and feedbacks. However, the reason for this belief and the answers to the questions in the survey are not known.

Respondents' perceptions pertaining to learning activities in these courses were definitely pointed towards case studies as the most beneficial. A likely rationale for this beneficial preference in case studies is that a case study is one of the most frequently used learning activities in classroom work, and these students feel inclined to select this type. Other learning activities, such as simulations and journal articles, were perceived as moderately beneficial.

Concerning the question of which topical areas are the most important in this superintendent's licensure program, school finance and school law were definitely viewed as being significant. With the survey, takers

being practicing principals, they quickly recognized the importance of finance and law in school administration. These two topical areas are part of everyday actions and issues of these principals, and thus, they recognize their significance. Four other academic topics were given fairly high marks in the survey. They were collective bargaining, leadership, public relations and personnel administration. Again, these four areas are also operational issues of principals in their day-to-day work.

The reason(s) for taking these licensure online courses was a pertinent question to ask in the survey. The number of students enrolling in these online courses has been increasing, and the need to seek a possible reason is warranted. Three strong choices were given in this question including convenience, work at your own schedule, and work at your own pace. These three reasons stood above all other reasons for selecting online courses. As university faculty and administrators observe students' perceptions of these course offerings, these perceptions must be considered when developing future online programs. Many student lives are filled with numerous professional, personal and family demands, and the offering of courses that are more convenient and suitable to life styles is needed. Moore and Wilson (2005) reported similar reasons of "convenience" and "learning at the time of my own choosing" in their studies.

One of the final questions in the survey with which the researcher sought data was the preferred class format. The question asked "Which (class) format suited the student in their educational pursuit of the superintendent's license". The response with this question was overwhelmingly slanted towards hybrid classes (which is a combination of face-to-face and online classes) at a 70% response rate, so response, hybrid classes are definitely the preferred mode of instruction as indicated by the principals. The reasons for taking online classes as indicated in question 6 point to the high response rate for hybrid classes. Convenience and working at your own schedule and pace seem to contribute to the hybrid preference. Conversely, the very low response rate (9%) for strictly face-to-face classes was somewhat surprising and telling. Respondents no longer view face-to-face classes as the course format to meet their students' needs. This current generation of students and their preferences for more online programming are impacting the number of these online classes, including the courses for the superintendent's licensure program. These students' perceptions of face-to-face classes when compared with online programming are significant in our present and future decisions for course development.

The open-ended question, "(What) suggestions to help further develop a quality superintendent's preparation program" received numerous comments and/or recommendations. The respondents expressed the need to keep these courses practical and realistic in their contents and learning activities. Also, these practicing principals expressed the busy schedules that they maintained, and the need for universities to design course work, such as the superintendent's online licensure program, more frequently in the future. One comment summarized this viewpoint from a respondent is "With crazy schedules and the demands that we are all under. Online courses make my superintendent's license a great deal easier".

Thus, it is important that we solicit the opinions of practicing principals who may be potential students in the superintendent licensure program, and follow through on programming changes to align with this input. These viewpoints provide direction for university instructors and administrators, as they review and design courses in the future. Smart and Cappel (2006) stated, "Developers of online learning need more understanding of how students perceive and react to elements of e-learning, along with how to apply approaches to enhance learning".

Case studies and simulations need to be a major part of the classes in the future, and further strengthen to

be added to the overall course development.

Overall, this superintendent's license online program has been a positive addition to Ashland University's EDAD. Based on this initial survey study, this researcher has learned a few lessons that may help the university's EDAD and other higher education institutions. First, the discovery of these students' perceptions may increase the satisfaction level of candidates enrolled in this program. Second, the survey results can lead to an orientation and support of candidates. Third, the further redesign of these online courses should take place to benefit the students in the programs. According to Bryan et al. (2005), "As universities move towards more online courses, an awareness of student perceptions and learning styles may be key components to student retention".

Subsequent studies should explore the specific types of case studies and simulations, which can enrich and benefit the students in the program. In addition, the administrative areas of school finance and law need to be further included in aspects of all courses in the program. The additional integration of financial and legal concepts into the online course will greatly enhance the value of these courses.

The discussion has highlighted some of the benefits, preferences and perceptions that respondents desire in their online courses. This discussion may also lay the foundation for further dialogue about the importance of certain components in the online programming. It is fairly conclusive that online courses are the preferred mode of students possibly entering the superintendent's licensure online program. By the survey results, it clearly showed that a large majority of individuals want online classes. These conclusions align with prior discussions and informal feedbacks from students that they wanted online programming. This study is one of the first research investigations to seek out and substantiate the opinions and thoughts of online programming in the superintendent's licensure program.

Implications for Future Research

The natural course of this research is to continue studying the participants' perceptions of online courses in the superintendent's licensure program. Since online course program is one of the most rapidly emerging formats offered by the Ashland University, further investigation, regarding how the course instructors and learning methodology can better serve the students is definitely warranted. Ashland University and the instructors must continue to refine these online programs, guiding students to richer and more focused instruction and courses. It is the author's ultimate goal, as an instructor, that the current and future students in this licensure program, through enhanced and more student centered courses, will further benefit from these studies. Although the online courses for the superintendent's licensure program, and other such programs, may elicit any number of research questions, there is an obvious area of research. That particular study is the assessment of the candidates who have completed the program and their perceptions of the effectiveness of it. For example, the focus of an inquiry may be the learning benefits and performance of online courses versus face-to-face classes. Furthermore, a larger survey of practicing principals might be conducted pertaining to their perceptions of enrolling in an online course program, and the reasons why and what they hope to gain.

There is also considerable opportunity for research, in reference to the satisfaction and usefulness of these online courses by the groups of students online versus face-to-face. This assessment could be completed over a specific time period and used as a basis of comparison of results of a survey, involving the same research questions, asked of students in face-to-face classes and those in online courses.

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